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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Fred Horvat

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"

So, another celebration of a Leap Year! And, as the "odd" day of the year - once every 4 years - it often brings extraordinary events. Like for us here in New England, having essentially no measurable snowfall in my area all winter, had some real snow on the 29th! Thankfully, although the snow lasted almost 36 hours, we only received about 3-4 inches, mashed down with a little rain mixed in! It was one of those "storms" that I would traditionally call a storm of inconvenience. Not enough that I'd have to get out the snowblower, but just enough to get a shovel out and scrape the walks and driveway. Oh well, this is New England, and the possibility of a snow-less winter just isn't really in the cards.

So, sick of politics yet? I certainly am. Watching the GOP race for nomination has certainly been a 3-ring circus. So far, it seems to be a 2-man race with two also-rans hanging on for whatever reason. Regardless of who wins, the GOP race is definitely providing fodder for the Obama campaign. Obama is going to have a field day with his future opponent!

What other great news do I have for you this week? Well, nothing really. Everywhere we look, there are tragic events going on in the world today. So, rather than talk about them, let's get to some interesting news topics that should have some interest for you, in this week's issue.

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Blizzard Lays Off 600 People!

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Blizzard Entertainment Lays Off 600 People

Blizzard Entertainment says it's cutting about 600 jobs.

The Irvine, Calif., company, which makes the popular "World of Warcraft" games, says that only about 10 percent of the cuts will involve jobs related to game development.

The "World of Warcraft" development team will not be affected.

Blizzard, which is part of Activision Blizzard Inc., says the decision to cut jobs was made after a review of business needs.

Blizzard's development and publishing schedules will not be affected and the company says it's still looking to hire game developers for certain positions.

Blizzard added that expenses related to the job cuts aren't expected to significantly reduce Activision Blizzard's financial results for 2012.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Republicans Introduce Softer Cyber Security Bill

Eight top Republicans introduced a cybersecurity bill on Thursday aimed at stopping an overarching, bipartisan measure proposed earlier this month in order to better protect critical infrastructure.

The measure, introduced by the top Republicans on eight committees, would require federal contractors to inform the government about cyber threats and make it easier for government regulators and corporations to communicate about threats.

"We believe that ensuring our nation's cybersecurity is critical. We have a bill that would do plenty to meet current challenges," said Senator John McCain in introducing the bill.

McCain, a critic of a measure supported by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, argued that the Republican-backed legislation was better because it included very little new regulation.

The Arizona Republican has also been critical of proposals to have the

Department of Homeland Security take a leading role in pushing better cyber security practices on sometimes reluctant industries.

Senator Saxby Chambliss, a co-sponsor of the McCain measure, agreed, saying: "More government is seldom a solution to any problem."

The Senate is also considering a rival bill Reid has said will be brought quickly to the Senate floor.

That bill is aimed at requiring upgrades in security for critical national infrastructure, which some cyber experts argue is needed to prevent a catastrophic attack on the nation’s water supply, electric grid, financial networks and transportation infrastructure.

The McCain bill does not include this requirement.

The Reid-backed bill’s sponsors include Senators John Rockefeller and Dianne Feinstein, both Democrats; Susan Collins, a Republican, and Joseph Lieberman, an independent.

There has been widespread and growing concern about incursions into U.S. networks by hackers looking to steal everything from state secrets to credit card numbers.

Victims have included defense contractors like Lockheed Martin Corp, web search leader Google Inc, Citigroup bank and exchange operator Nasdaq OMX.

Politicians have not been immune. In 2008, hackers targeted both President Barack Obama and McCain’s presidential campaigns.

The U.S. House of Representatives is considering legislation that overlaps with the Senate measures on some points.

For example, the House’s Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence approved a bill in December that would expand a pilot Pentagon program for sharing classified and sensitive threat information with defense contractors and their Internet service providers.

USTelecom, a broadband association, said it supported the McCain measure because it would effectively protect against cybersecurity threats, especially by improving information-sharing.

"We can support the bill introduced today because it pursues those objectives without creating new bureaucracies or regulatory mandates that would erode, rather than enhance, the ability of network providers to provide nimble and effective responses to cyber threats," said USTelecom President Walter McCormick.

Hackers Winning Security War

Technology security professionals seeking wisdom from ndustry leaders in San Francisco this week saw more of the dark side than they had expected: a procession of CEO speakers whose companies have been hacked.

"It’s pretty discouraging," said Gregory Roll, who came for advice and to consider buying security software for his employer, a large bank which he

declined to name because he was not authorized to speak on its behalf. "It’s a constant battle, and we’re losing."

The annual RSA Conference, which draws to a close on Friday, brought a record crowd of more than 20,000 as Congress weighs new legislation aimed at better protecting U.S. companies from cyber attacks by spies, criminals and activists.

If the bills suggest that hackers are so far having their way with all manner of companies, the procession of speakers brought it home in a personal way.

The opening presentation by Art Coviello, executive chairman of conference sponsor and recent hacking victim RSA, set the tone with the Rolling Stones song "You Can’t Always Get What You Want."

RSA, owned by data storage maker EMC Corp, is the largest provider of password-generating tokens used by government agencies, banks and others to authenticate employees or customers who log on away from the office. Not long after last year’s RSA conference, the company said an email with a poisoned attachment had been opened by an employee.

That gave hackers access to the corporate network and they emerged with information about how RSA calculates the numbers displayed on SecurID tokens, which was in turn used in an attack on Lockheed Martin that the defense contractor said it foiled.

Coviello said he hoped his company’s misfortune would help foster a sense of urgency in the face of formidable opponents, especially foreign governments, who are being aided by the blurring of personal and professional online activities. Some 70 percent of employees in one survey he cited admitted to subverting corporate rules in order to use social networks or smartphones or get access to other resources, making security that much harder.

"Our networks will be penetrated. People will still make mistakes," Coviello said. He argued that with better monitoring and analysis of traffic inside company networks, "we can manage risk to acceptable levels."

If that didn’t inspire enough enthusiasm after the worst year for corporate security in history - including the rise of activist hacks by Anonymous, numerous breaches at Sony Corp, and attacks on Nasdaq software used by corporate boards - there was more to come.

Next onstage was James Bidzos, CEO of core Internet infrastructure company VeriSign, which disclosed in an October securities filing that it had lost unknown data to hackers in 2010. [He was followed by Enrique Salem, CEO of the largest security company, Symantec, which recently admitted that source code from 2006 version of its program for gaining remote access to desktop computers had been stolen and published.

FBI Director Robert Mueller spoke on Thursday, warning that he expected cyber threats to pass terrorism as the country’s top threat.

Though all sounded an upbeat call to arms, some watching grumbled that vendors with little credibility were trying to use their own shortcomings to peddle more expensive and unproven technology.

"There’s some panic" among the buyers, said a security official with ING

Groep NV who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak to the press. Banks are very sensitive to questions about security breaches and often deny they have any significant problems in this area.

That panic contributed to vigorous panel discussions and hallway debates about who should be in charge of safeguarding defense companies, banks and utilities - private industry itself, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or the National Security Agency, which has the greatest capability but a legacy of civil liberties issues.

A pending bill backed by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid would put DHS in the lead, with assistance from NSA. Former NSA chief Michael Hayden said in an interview at the conference that should suffice.

"The Net is inherently insecure," Hayden said. "We need to quit admiring the problem and move out. No position could be worse than the one we're in now."

Coviello said one of the few pieces of good news was that the country as a whole is now realizing the gravity of the loss of its trade and government secrets, along with the difficulty of reversing the trend.

"People have definitely talked more seriously after our breach," he said in an interview. "Maybe a sense of realism has settled in."

Google's Privacy Shift Is March 1: Everything You Need To Know

Google s new all-encompassing privacy policy goes into effect March 1, meaning the company will start treating information it gathers across dozens of its subsidiary sites - things like GMail, YouTube, Blogger, Shopping, News, Maps, Books, Google+, and more - all as a single entity, rather than as dozens of little sub-entities each with their own caches of information about a user. Google says the new policy isn t really a change: it s not collecting any new data about people, it s just going to start using that information uniformly across its services. For example, interests and topics Google picks up on by reading your Gmail might influence the recommended videos and advertisements that appear on YouTube. Shopping habits of your friends on Google+ might influence ads appearing in your Google search results.

For some people, this is no big deal - in fact, many Internet users assumed Google had been doing this all along. For others, it s a tremendous shift away from the company s now almost-forgotten mantra, "don t be evil." By combining user information across accounts and services, not only will Google have one-stop-shopping for potentially enormous amounts of personal information about users, but that information will be used to target advertising.

And even more people may have no idea the change is imminent: according to Big Brother Watch, only 12 percent of Google users have actually read Google s new privacy policy. (We recommend you give it a glance.)

So - how is all this going to work starting tomorrow?
It s mostly about Google accounts

The first (and perhaps most important) thing to remember is the bulk of information Google collects about users - and, in turn, uses to fuel its

ad sales and to customize your Google experience - is associated with Google accounts. That means as soon as you re logged into Google (whether to check email, upload a video, check your Google+ profile, comment on Blogger, view your custom News page, etc) Google is tracking your activities and associating them specifically with you. Over time - and really not very much time - Google may be able to assemble a surprisingly complete dossier of your location, career and work, interests, friends, social circles, habits, and more.

This process produces even more-comprehensive results for users who stay logged in to Google constantly, whether from a traditional notebook or desktop computer and/or an Android-powered device. Although Android smartphones don t have to be tied to a Google account to use basic phone features, they do have to be tied to a Google account to use things like Gmail, Google Talk, and the Android Market.

If you use a Google account, here are some ways to limit what Google tracks about you:

Web History: Google keeps track of every Web search you perform when you re logged in to a Google account, storing it all in the account s "Web history." You can view the Web History associated with an account (you have to be logged in). Google provides access to the information by date (you can potentially see your Web searches for as long as your Google account has existed; Google even provides a total number of stored searches), and enables users to remove selected items of their Web history - so those searches of manga sites you did while trying to figure out what the cool kids were talking about won t come back to haunt you. Web History can be limited to just searches, or can be expanded to include full text of pages you ve visited.

The Web History page enables users to limit Web History to just pages they ve visited, or turn off Web History entirely, so Google doesn t store any history information. Users can also delete any existing Web history altogether. For maximum privacy, turn off Web history and delete any history Google has stored. Doing this also means Google will not be able to use the information to personalize your search results or ads. (A terminology note: Google doesn t consider Web History disabled or turned off, merely "paused.")

YouTube History: Google may be unifying all its privacy policies under one umbrella, but that doesn t mean all of Google s services have their settings in one place. (There is the Google Dashboard, which at least collects together links to individual services settings.) If you use YouTube, it s a good idea to check your account s YouTube History, which includes both a history of videos you ve watched and searches you ve conducted on YouTube while logged in to an account. YouTube divides these into two separate tabs in the YouTube settings: to maximize privacy (and reduce the amount of information Google uses to customize services and push ads) click both "Clear all search history" and the "Pause" buttons for viewing and search history. Again, Google doesn t actually say it turns data collection off, it just "pauses" it.

Gmail: Gmail is, of course, a treasure-trove of information about individual Google users. Google employees don t read Gmail, but Google s computer programs do, looking for words, phrases, and contact information it can use to bolster your dossier. Once Google has read a message (which it does even before it arrives in your inbox) any information gleaned from it is whisked away. You can delete the message, but it s already too late to prevent Google from analyzing its contents. However, by default, Google

saves Google Talk chat histories in Gmail, and since Gmail has integrated Google Voice, that can include records of voice calls placed from your Google account. To disable Google Chat history, go to Gmail s preferences (choose "Settings" from the gear icon within Gmail). To delete existing chat records, go to the "Chats" folder within Gmail, where you can manage chat records like they were email messages.

Ads preferences: Are you a long-time Google account user? Here s a setting that might scare you: if you ve been carrying around a Google "id" cookie, you can look at a bit of the dossier Google has assembled about you in Ads Preferences. Depending what activity Google has monitored - and what information you ve given to Google in your profiles and account data - Google may have a pretty accurate picture of your gender, age, location, and key interest areas. Google does enable users to opt out of its "id" cookie; if you opt-in, you can even tell Google what sorts of ads you re most interested in seeing.

Use other Google services (like News, Docs, Calendar, or Blogger) that might store information about your activities? Check out the Google Dashboard: it does not provide access to all settings, but should at least provide links to get you to the right place for any Google services associated with your account.

What if you re not logged in to Google?

If you re not logged in to a Google account, Google can still track some of your activity. If your browser or device doesn t have one already, Google will give it a unique cookie so it can anonymously keep track of your activity on Google sites as long as that cookie is set. That enables Google to know the same person (or at least the same browser), which can be linked to Web searches, YouTube video views, and more, even if no account is signed in.

Several popular Google services operate just fine without being signed in to Google: these include Web search (it won t be personalized with social connections), Google Maps (Google will still use any location info entered to serve ads), and YouTube (you can watch, but you can t comment or share).

However, even if you re not signed in, Google still keeps track of plenty of personal bits. First off, it notes what IP address you re using when you connect to Google, and uses that information to generate your location. Although most IP addresses don t identify a particular location (like 1001 Sample Street, Sausalito), they are almost always good enough to get a general area (like "San Francisco" or "North Bay.") However, enough information is associated with some IP addresses to let Google narrow down location to a particular address, and there s no easy way for users to tell if they re using one. Examples would include cafes, libraries, and other places offering Wi-Fi, as well as businesses and other organizations with static IP addresses. You cannot turn off Google s efforts to assess your location by IP address; it considers this action essential to providing their services.

Google will also store search strings, note what search results and advertisements you click, and keep track of what videos you watch, even if you re not logged in - the information is just stored with that anonymous cookie instead of an account. If you then log in to a Google account while that anonymous cookie is on your browser, Google can then tie the two together.

Google also collects information about the devices and software you use to connect to Google services - although they re absolutely not unique about this. Virtually every Web site on the Internet does the same thing.
How to control what Google knows - at least a little

If you re concerned about what Google might collect about you once the new privacy policy is in effect, here are a few additional things you could do:

Remove the Google Toolbar: The Google Toolbar is a browser add-on for Internet Explorer and (formerly) Firefox that provides quick access to search history, bookmarks, and email that s often distributed as an add-on bundle with third-party products. Google Toolbar makes it convenient to search the Web and email, but the Toolbar also relies heavily on Google s Web History (see above), and can provide location information to third parties. These days, Google Toolbar s functions are largely subsumed by search fields and other function built into browsers: if you re still using Google Toolbar and are concerned about what Google knows about you, uninstall it. And "pause" your Web History (see above).

Don t Log In: Of course, the simple way to avoid having Google track your actions is not to use Google services, or at least not to log into Google services when you don t need them. For desktop computer users, there are plenty of alternative services available, from Vimeo for online video to Yahoo and Hotmail for free email to Bing for searching to Mapquest for mapping. Of course, all those services also do everything they can to track users actions and interests.

Android users, however, are kind of stuck: once an Android device has been associated with a Google account, the system offers no way to log out, and the only reliable way to remove the account association is through a factory reset. Android does offer some settings and preferences to help secure information (for instance, users can choose not to share location information), and several utilities are available to protect access to things like Gmail, and to remote wipe lost or stolen devices. Again, users best option to prevent Google from assembling or augmenting a dossier is not to use the Google services built into Android phones - including Search, Maps, YouTube, Gmail, Calendar, and more.

What about Do Not Track and Third-Party Cookies?

Desktop and mobile browsers increasingly offer advanced settings to disable so-called third-party cookies - tracking cookies set by a service other than the particular Web site you re visiting. Similarly, modern browsers are increasingly supporting Do Not Track, a new standard that requests remote sites not engage in user tracking for a particular connection. Google s even getting in on the act, pledging Do Not Track support for Google Chrome.

Disabling third party cookies won t help you stay private from Google. When you execute a search on Google or watch a video on YouTube, you ve explicitly chosen to use that service: Google is a first party, not a third party. It will, however, help keep Google s advertising subsidiary, DoubleClick, from placing cookies on your browser when you visit sites using DoubleClick services.

Google has pledged to honor "Do Not Track" requests as a participant in the Obama administration s Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights. However, Google has not yet implemented support for Do Not Track across its services, and clicking a Do Not Track button in a browser will do nothing

to change the amount of information Google gleans from users who are signed in to Google accounts or, say, reads from Gmail.

Users who are deeply concerned about their online privacy can take additional steps to ensure the information Google and others potentially collect about them is minimized. Popular options include anonymization services and proxies (which essentially route Internet traffic through separate computers so there s no direct link back to a users device - but, of course, you have to ask yourself whether you trust the service). The National Advertising Initiative also supports a way to opt out of advertising by its members, which includes Google and most of the major players in the online advertising arena - of course, it works using a cookie, so if you delete cookies (or switch to a different device) you have to opt out again. Add-ons and plug-ins accomplishing similar things are available for Firefox and Chrome. (See a list here, at bottom of page.)

Despite the uproar about online privacy, however, most consumers just don t seem to care. Many don t see the harm in Google and other companies knowing about their interest, movements, and location in exchange for free services and directed advertising - some consumers like personalized advertising that s aware of their preferences and current location. And it s important to remember that a huge number of online sites and services are supported solely by advertising: the more relevant that advertising is to their users, the more clicks they get, the more commissions they earn, and the longer they can continue offering their service - or (gasp!) even improve it.

Whether you re a privacy maven, a happy fully-logged user of Google services, or somewhere in between, the most important thing is probably to understand what information Google is collecting, how it s being used, and being sure you re comfortable with it.

Google To Dig Deeper Into Users’ Lives

If you’re amazed - and maybe even a little alarmed - about how much Google seems to know about you, brace yourself. Beginning Thursday, Google will operate under a streamlined privacy policy that enables the Internet’s most powerful company to dig even deeper into the lives of its more than 1 billion users.

Google says the changes will make it easier for consumers to understand how it collects personal information, and allow the company to create more helpful and compelling services. Critics, including most of the country’s state attorneys general and a top regulator in Europe, argue that Google is trampling on people’s privacy rights in its relentless drive to sell more ads.

Here’s a look at some of the key issues to consider as Google tries to learn about you.

Q: How will Google’s privacy changes affect users?

A: Google Inc. is combining more than 60 different privacy policies so it will be able to throw all the data it gathers about each of its logged-in users into personal dossiers. The information Google learns about you while you enter requests into its search engine can be culled to suggest

videos to watch when you visit the company’s YouTube site.

Users who write a memo on Google’s online word processing program, Docs, might be alerted to the misspelling of the name of a friend or co-worker a user has communicated with on Google’s Gmail. The new policy pools information from all Google-operated services, empowering the company to connect the dots from one service to the next.

Q: Why is Google making these changes?

A: The company, based in Mountain View, Calif., says it is striving for a "beautifully simple, intuitive user experience across Google." What Google hasn’t spent much time talking about is how being able to draw more revealing profiles about its users will help sell advertising - the main source of its $38 billion in annual revenue.

One reason Google has become such a big advertising network: Its search engine analyzes requests to figure out which people are more likely to be interested in marketing pitches about specific products and services. Targeting the ads to the right audience is crucial because in many cases, Google only gets paid when someone clicks on an ad link. And, of course, advertisers tend to spend more money if Google is bringing them more customers.

Q: Is there a way to prevent Google from combining the personal data it collects from all its services?

A: No, not if you’re a registered user of Gmail, Google Plus, YouTube, or other Google products. But you can minimize the data Google gathers. For starters, make sure you aren’t logged into one of Google’s services when you’re using Google’s search engine, watching a YouTube video or perusing pictures on Picasa. You can get a broad overview of what Google knows about you at http://www.google.com/dashboard , where a Google account login is required. Google also offers the option to delete users’ history of search activity.

It’s important to keep in mind that Google can still track you even when you’re not logged in to one of its services. But the information isn’t quite as revealing because Google doesn’t track you by name, only through a numeric Internet address attached to your computer or an alphanumeric string attached to your Web browser.

Q: Are all Google services covered by the privacy policy?

A: No, a few products, such as Google’s Chrome Web browser and mobile payment processor Wallet, will still be governed by separate privacy policies.

Q: Is Google’s new privacy policy legal?

A: The company has no doubt about it. That’s why it’s repeatedly rebuffed pleas to delay the changes since announcing the planned revisions five weeks ago. But privacy activists and even some legal authorities have several concerns.

The Electronic Privacy Information Center, a privacy rights group, sued the FTC in a federal court in an effort to force the FTC to exercise its powers and block Google’s privacy changes. A federal judge ruled the courts didn’t have the authority to tell the FTC how to regulate Google. The FTC says it is always looking for evidence that one of its consent

orders has been violated.

Earlier this week, the French regulatory agency CNIL warned Google CEO Larry Page that the new policy appears to violate the European Union's strict data-protection rules. Last week, 36 attorneys general in the U.S. and its territories derided the new policy as an "invasion of privacy" in a letter to Page.

One of the major gripes is that registered Google users aren't being given an option to consent to, or reject, the changes, given that they developed their dependence on the services under different rules. In particular, people who bought smartphones running on Google's Android software, and signed two-year contracts to use the devices, can't easily avoid the new privacy rules unless they buy a different handset and pay an early-termination penalty.

Q: What regulatory power do government agencies have to change or amend the privacy changes?

A: The U.S. Federal Trade Commission gained greater oversight over Google's handling of personal information as part of a settlement reached last year. Google submitted to the agreement after exposing its users email contacts when it launched a now-defunct social networking service called Buzz in 2010. The consent order requires Google's handling of personal information to be audited every other year and forbids misleading or deceptive privacy changes.

Google met with the FTC before announcing the privacy changes. That suggests the agency probably approved the revisions.

Spain Arrests 4 Suspected Anonymous Hackers

Police say they have arrested four suspected hackers allied to the loose-knit Anonymous movement in connection with attacks on Spanish political party websites.

A National Police statement said two servers used by the group in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic have been blocked.

It said the four included the alleged manager of Anonymous' computer operations in Spain and Latin America, who was identified only by his initials and the aliases "Thunder" and "Pacotron."

The four are suspected of defacing websites, carrying out denial-of-service attacks and publishing data on police assigned to the royal palace and the premier's office online.

Tuesday's statement said the arrests were part of an Interpol operation.

U.S. Serviceman Who Leaked Info to Wikileaks Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

Is U.S. Army Private Bradley Manning a hero for leaking classified government information to WikiLeaks, or is he a criminal? While public opinion is divided, that hasn't stopped the international community from

nominating him for a Nobel Peace Prize.

In 2010, Manning allegedly obtained hundreds of thousands of U.S. Army documents, most pertaining to operations in Iraq, and tens of thousands pertaining to operations in Afghanistan. Among his charges, Manning is linked to video footage that depicts U.S. troops killing a journalist (warning: very graphic content) in Iraq, an event which the U.S. government allegedly concealed.

Manning has been charged with 22 separate crimes related to the leaks, and is currently being held by the government in Kuwait. The most serious of the charges, "aiding the enemy," carries the possibility of the death penalty.

This is not the first time that WikiLeaks has been on the mind of the Nobel nominating committee. In 2011, WikiLeaks itself received a nomination for the Peace Prize honor. A total of 231 people were nominated for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, including Russian human rights advocate Svetlana Gannushkina and a former prime minister of the Ukraine. The winner of the prize will be announced in October.

Chinese Relish Crack in Great Firewall, Log on to Facebook

Some Chinese Internet users have this week been able to access blocked websites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, relishing the newfound freedom although the reason for the breach in China’s Great Firewall of censorship was a mystery.

China blocks most foreign social networking sites (SNS) out of fear that unfettered access would lead to instability. Chinese SNS firms have filled the void by offering similar products that censor topics the government may find sensitive.

"I can suddenly access YouTube! No need to breach the firewall!" Weibo user Arvin Xie posted on Tuesday.

Weibo is a microblogging platform, similar to Twitter, that allows users to post short messages and follow other users.

Internet users including students on university campuses reported that they were able to access YouTube, Facebook and Twitter on their mobile phones and desktops in the afternoon and evening on Monday and Tuesday.

"I used Facebook for the first time yesterday," Zhang Wenjin, 23, a student at Shanghai’s prestigious Jiao Tong University told Reuters on Tuesday.

"I went on and took a look. I’m sure there were suddenly a lot of people who signed up on Facebook yesterday," Zhang said, adding that she had also signed up for an account.

It is unclear what caused the crack in China’s Great Firewall, as the blocking of websites and censoring of search results for politically sensitive terms is known, or how widespread it was.

On Wednesday, access to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter was again blocked.

Some users in China pay for a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass the

blocking of websites and censoring of searches.

Over the weekend, Chinese users also gained access to Google Inc's social networking site, Google+ and flooded U.S. President Barack Obama's page on the site with calls for greater freedom in the world's most populous country.

Google+ is currently blocked through regular desktop access but its mobile application, which let users in China access the site, has become accessible recently.

China, with more than 500 million Internet users, is the world's largest and most vibrant Internet community.

Kim Dotcom Says He'll Beat 'Political' Piracy Case

In his first interviews since his January arrest in New Zealand, Megaupload founder Kim Dotcom says he will prevail in what he calls a "political" Internet piracy case against him.

In what is shaping up to be one of the biggest copyright cases in history, U.S. authorities are trying to extradite Dotcom on racketeering and other federal charges. They say he and colleagues at his file-sharing website facilitated millions of illegal downloads, costing songwriters and moviemakers some half a billion dollars in lost copyright revenue while making a fortune for themselves.

Dotcom was arrested Jan. 20 and released last week on bail. Under the conditions of his release, he is confined to his Auckland home and isn't allowed Internet access.

In a story published Thursday in The New Zealand Herald, Dotcom said U.S. authorities cherry-picked emails and other evidence in a way that was "misleading and malicious."

"For me, sitting in my cell, I'm thinking, 'Why are they doing this? They can't win it'," he told a reporter for a sister publication, the Herald on Sunday.

Dotcom said in the interview that Megaupload had staff whose jobs were to take down any material that might infringe copyright. The U.S. indictment, however, alleges that Dotcom and Megaupload routinely took down individual links to offending material but left the offending material itself in place.

In another interview, Dotcom told the file-sharing news website TorrentFreak that New Zealand authorities had "put on a show for the FBI" when they swooped down in helicopters to arrest him at his mansion.

"We're going for this and we're confident we're going to win," Dotcom told the website in an article published Monday. "We feel that the action taken against us was political."

Dotcom said in the Herald interview that on his first day of incarceration at Auckland Central Remand Prison, he didn't get provided with basics like a blanket or toilet paper. He said he was deprived of sleep after being woken every two hours by guards shining flashlights in his face to make

sure he was still in his cell and still alive.

But Dotcom, described in U.S. court papers as about 1.95 meters (6 feet, 5 inches) tall and weighing 146 kilograms (322 pounds), also told the paper that he was happy about losing 35 pounds (16 kilograms) while he was jailed.

Microsoft’s Future Riding on Windows 8

Microsoft is scrambling to preserve what’s left of its kingdom.

Since the company released its Windows operating system in 1985, most of the sequels have been variations on the same theme. Not that it mattered much. Regardless of the software’s quality, Microsoft managed to remain at the center of the personal computing universe.

The stakes are much different as Microsoft Corp. puts the finishing touches on Windows 8 - perhaps the most important piece of software the Redmond, Wash. company has designed since co-founder Bill Gates won the contract to build the first operating system for IBM Corp.’s personal computer in the early 1980s.

A test, or "beta", version of the revamped operating system will be unveiled Wednesday in Barcelona, nudging Windows 8 a step closer to its anticipated mass market release in September or October. The company will offer the most extensive look at Windows 8’s progress since it released an early version of the system to developers five months ago.

Microsoft designed Windows 8 to help it perform a difficult balancing act. The company hopes to keep milking revenue from a PC market that appears to be past its prime, while trying to gain a stronger foothold in the more fertile field of mobile devices. It’s a booming market that, so far, has been defined and dominated by Apple Inc.’s trend-setting iPhone and iPad, and Google Inc.’s ubiquitous Android software.

"Microsoft’s future path is riding on Windows 8 and its success," said Gartner Inc. analyst David Cearley. "This is a chance for Microsoft to re-establish itself in a market where it’s becoming increasingly irrelevant."

If Windows 8 is a hit, it could also help lift the fortunes of struggling PC makers, including Hewlett-Packard Co. and Dell Inc. Besides giving businesses and consumers a reason to consider new PC purchases, Windows 8 is expected to spawn a new breed of hybrid machines that will be part computer tablet, part laptop computer.

If Windows 8 is a flop, however, it will increase the pressure on Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer. His 12-year reign has been marred by the company’s troubles adapting to an Internet-driven upheaval. As Microsoft has stumbled, faster-innovating companies such as Apple and Google have elbowed their way into a position to steer the direction of computing for the next decade or two.

Ballmer, known for his zealous faith in Microsoft, hails Windows 8 as the catalyst for an exciting - and lucrative - new era at the 37-year-old software maker.

Investors seem to be believers, too. Microsoft’s stock has recently been trading its highest levels since April 2008, closing at $31.35 on Monday. The stock has gained about 21 percent so far this year. By comparison, Apple’s stock has surged 30 percent during the same period, while Google’s shares have dropped 6 percent.

Microsoft’s financial performance traditionally improves when it releases a new version of Windows. The last upgrade came in October 2009 when Windows 7 hit the market. The company has sold more than 525 million copies of Windows 7 since then. Part of Window 7’s success stemmed from pent-up demand; the previous version, Vista, was so clunky and buggy that many PC users stuck with the system they already had on their machines or switched to Apple’s technology on Mac computers.

Windows 8 is radically different from its predecessors. The system won’t even have Microsoft’s familiar "Start" menu. All applications are spread across a mosaic of tiles, as part of a design Microsoft calls "Metro." The tiles, which resemble road signs, can be navigated with a swipe of the finger on the display screen or with a keyboard and a computer mouse. The tiles also provide a glimpse at the activity occurring in applications connected to the Web, such as email.

The system also is expected to enable users to easily back up their pictures, movies, music and other files on a Microsoft storage service called SkyDrive, which will compete against Apple’s iCloud.

The operating system’s versatility means it can be used to power computer tablets, as well as traditional PCs.

Microsoft badly wants a piece of the tablet market that has been cutting into PC sales since Apple introduced the iPad two years ago.

In the quarter that included the holiday shopping season, Apple shipped 15.4 million iPads, more than doubling the volume from the same time in the previous year. Meanwhile, worldwide personal computer sales dipped slightly, and Microsoft’s revenue in its Windows division declined 6 percent. It marked the fourth time in the past five quarters that Microsoft’s Windows revenue has fallen from the previous year.

Reversing or slowing that trend is critical for Microsoft. It still relies on the PC industry for about 55 percent of its revenue, according to Nomura Equity Research analyst Rick Sherlund. "The launch of Windows 8 should provide a few years of robust growth and opportunity for Microsoft to reposition itself to better defend its position against challengers," Sherlund wrote in a note after Microsoft reported the latest erosion in its Windows division.

Besides spurring more sales of the new operating system, Windows 8 is likely to drive demand for the next generation of the Office suite, another major moneymaker for Microsoft.

Windows 8 could inspire more PC makers to design machines that combine the convenience of computer tablets with the utility of a notebook computer. These devices would be similar to the so-called "Ultrabook" computers that offer a Windows-based version of Apple’s lightweight MacBook "Air" machines. Once Windows 8 is available, the Ultrabook line could be expanded to include machines equipped with screen that swivels off the keyboard to take advantage of the system’s touch controls and provide a tablet-like experience.

Microsoft clearly envisions Windows 8 becoming the foundation for pure tablets, too. That's why it's developing a version of Windows 8 that can run on the more tablet-friendly microprocessor technology licensed by ARM Holdings. That version will complement the Windows 8 design that will run on the Intel Corp. chips that power most PCs.

HP, the world's largest PC maker, is already counting on Windows 8 to deliver better times. The company's division that includes desktop and laptop computers suffered a 15 percent drop in revenue during its more recent quarter ending in January. CEO Meg Whitman, last week, said HP expects to release PCs and tablets running on Windows 8 in time for the holiday shopping season. HP's Windows 8 product line will include a tablet designed for corporate customers.

The biggest question hanging over Windows 8 is whether the long wait for the software will leave Microsoft hopelessly behind Apple and Google in mobile computing.

Whatever headlines Microsoft grabs during Wednesday's preview are likely to be quickly overshadowed when Apple shows off the iPad 3 - a hotly anticipated event, expected to occur in early March.

Meanwhile, Google says more than 300 million smartphones and tablets are already running on its Android software, with another 850,000 devices getting activated each day. At that rate, another 155 million to 180 million devices could be running on Android by the time Windows 8 comes out in September or October. As it is, a version of Android is already running the second hottest-selling tablet, Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Fire.

"Microsoft is late to the game and this is a different game than they have been playing," Cearley said. "But if they hit a home run with Windows 8, it could still turn some things around."

Apple Announces Event, iPad 3 Launch Expected

Apple is inviting reporters to an event next Wednesday in San Francisco. An image on the invite showing part of an iPad screen suggests it's to announce a new model.

The company has been widely expected to reveal the third version of the iPad soon, close to the anniversary of the launch of the iPad 2.

The invitation is for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, where Apple holds larger launch events.

Apple didn't provide any details on the new device. Various unconfirmed reports speak of a sharper screen and faster cellular broadband options.

It's not known when such a new device would be available for sale. Last year, sales of the iPad 2 began in the U.S. nine days after the announcement.

Chrome Still Trying To Catch Firefox; IE Still Dropping

At the end of 2011, it looked like Chrome had knocked Firefox from the number-two spot in Web browser rankings - but it s starting to look like that title might have been a little premature. According to Net Applications Net MarketShare report, both Internet Explorer and Google Chrome lost ground in February 2012, leaving Firefox in the number-two spot with a two percent lead over Chrome - at least in the desktop browser market. All versions of Internet Explorer still account for a little more than half of all desktop browsers out there (52.84 percent, a drop of 0.12 percent since January), while Chrome slipped to an 18.9 percent share, down one percent from a peak of 19.11 percent in December 2011.

Apple s Safari desktop browser also saw significant gains in February, jumping from 4.9 to 5.24 percent of the browser market. Opera also moved up from 1.67 to 1.71 percent.

The new figures highlight some of the discrepancies in how different firms account for browser share. Net Applications collects its data from customers using its live stats services, and says the data spans about 160 million visitors a month. Of course, there s no way of knowing whether the sites using Net Applications services are representative of the Web as a whole; in fact, they re probably not, since 76 percent report they participate in pay-per-click programs and 43 percent claim to be commerce sites.

Other services with different methodologies produce different numbers. For instance, StatCounter shows very different figures, with Internet Explorer accounting for only 35.75 percent of browser usage in February 2012, Chrome in second place with a 29.84 percent share, and Firefox in third with a 24.88 percent share. According to StatCounter, IE is in decline, Chrome is growing fast, and Firefox did see a slight uptick from January to February.

Why the discrepancy? Are one or both of these just doing it wrong? No - both companies have a solid history of reporting as accurately as possible using the data they gather. The issue is that Net Applications and StatCounter aren t counting the same people. StatCounter is a Web analytics service, with customers using its code on more than 3 million Web sites around the world accounting for over 18 billion hits a month. If users visit a site with StatCounter code, the visit is included with aggregate data about browser share and other things. Again, there s no way to know whether StatCounter s base of sites is in any way representative of the broader Internet - and, in fact, they re probably not since they re sites looking for (and using) third party analytics services.

The bottom line: the fact major metrics services aren t even in general agreement over their figures points to how difficult it is to measure browser share in the worldwide market. As always, consider such figures general guidelines, and consider any announcement of watershed changes in browser share with a grain of salt.

Users Still Can’t Get Password Protection Right

Apparently the Internet is a small world, with CNN Money reporting that most common password used in business settings is: Password1.

In a world where technology is rampant, and changes to privacy agreements create waves of fury, it is a bit hard to believe that people are not

tech-savvy enough to select passwords that are at least a little hard to guess.

However, the folks at Mashable are reporting that a Cambridge University team took a page of common passwords and PIN numbers onto the street and five out of every 20 people confirmed seeing their secret code on the list. That is quite an astonishing find, considering the information age has brought a computer into the pockets of folks across the globe.

While being lax in password security is at least a bit understandable for a large business where many people may need access to the same account, using 1111 or 1234 as an ATM PIN is pretty much unforgivable.

Last year Microsoft decided to take a stance against commonly used passwords, as TechWeek Europe reported. If a major company, rooted in technology, can ban the use of easily cracked passwords, than surely other companies can follow suit. It seems pretty clear that users can simply not be trusted, which is probably more about having a few more than a handful of passwords and PINs to remember. Perhaps automatically generating passwords and not allowing users to change them will soon become the order of the day.

In any increasingly electronic and connected world, where sharing, liking, and tweeting are becoming more and more common, protection of account access becomes even more important. Users share some of the responsibility, and everybody is probably guilty of a simple password structure, but removing the temptation seems like the best and easiest way to go. Just like Microsoft did.

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